

Available online at [www.sciencedirect.com](http://www.sciencedirect.com)**SciVerse ScienceDirect**

Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 59 (2012) 357 – 363

**Procedia**  
Social and Behavioral Sciences

UKM Teaching and Learning Congress 2011

# Perspectives of UKM newcomers to the academic environment of the university

Rohaty Mohd Majzub\*

*Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia*

---

## Abstract

Career development is challenging task for those who wish to excel in the university. This is especially true for newcomers to the academia whose career path has to be built successfully. In research universities, productivity and publications are important components influencing promotions. The main aim of this study was to explore how newcomers perceive the academic environment of the university including expectations stipulated by the university and how they manage themselves as newcomers to the academia. Ten newcomers who have been in the university for at least two semesters were interviewed and the data gathered were analyzed qualitatively. The findings show that: (a) newcomers initially perceived their roles were essentially to teach; (b) their role perceptions changed as a result of the research university status and; (c) newcomers generally do not have full knowledge of the academic community including collegial relationship building; (d) newcomers coping strategies include faculty involvement, information seeking and career planning. The newcomers' needs include the mentoring processes between newcomers and senior members of the academic staff as well as increase the university support structures.

© 2011 Published by Elsevier Ltd. Selection and/or peer reviewed under responsibility of the UKM Teaching and Learning Congress 2011. Open access under [CC BY-NC-ND license](#).

**Keywords:** Academic community; career development; newcomers, research environment; university

---

## 1. Introduction

Career development in the university is of paramount importance as newcomers to the academia have to experience and learn from the academic community and the socio academic environment. This is undoubtedly becoming more crucial and important in the light of the research university. The latter need to excel in terms of research productivity and publications cannot be refuted to ensure high ranking (Light and Cox, 2001). High expectations are demanded of the academia which comprised of both new and old lecturers both novice and experienced. Newcomers recruited to the lowest rung of the academia are welcome or welcomed themselves to the university academic environment facing both challenges and aspirations and accommodate to the values of the community. What comprises the academic discourse community? How do newcomers integrate in such community? They have to understand the socio cultural and intellectual ambience to be accepted and to experience inclusion.

---

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +6- 019-3813-740; Fax: +6-03-8925-4372  
E-mail address: [rohatymajzub@yahoo.com](mailto:rohatymajzub@yahoo.com)

Gravett and Petersen (2007) reported the findings of their study on newcomers which stated that: (a) newcomers have to change their perceptions and expectations about what it mean to become an academic; (b) newcomers experienced their entry into the academic world as a highly individualized process; (c) newcomers were initially ignorant of the features and complexity of the discourse of the academic community (Dunkin, 1990). The demands of the research universities can be overwhelming to the newcomers who may be struggling to identify with the system. Pertinent questions include their perceptions on the meaning attached to being an academic, the changing expectations in the university landscape, the interface between newcomers and seniors and the coping strategies newcomers employ to address the demands of academic environment. The theoretical premises of this study include the psychology of change, career socialization and development. This paper presents the research findings on the perspectives of newcomers whether tutors or lecturers recruited into the world of the academia.

The main objective of this research is to explore how newcomers experience their inclusion into the university research community, the challenges they faced and the coping strategies they utilized as a member of the academic community. Challenges refer to the issues and difficulties they faced in the academic world and the coping skills referred to the adjustment and strategies they used to handle the situation involved. It is hoped that the findings of the study will shed light on the socio cultural milieu of the academia which relates to the newcomers and the interaction between the newcomers and the academic discourse community in the university.

## 2. Methodology

The study is a qualitative study employing the use of in-depth interviews as the data generating method (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2002). The study intends to gauge the perceptions of newcomers to the research environment of the university. The purposeful sample consisted of ten newcomers from different faculties who have been in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia for at least two semesters but have not exceeded two years. The interview schedules include open questions about university life. Data was analyzed by identifying important themes namely: (a) the meaning attached to being an academic; (b) the changing needs and expectations of the academia; (c) the characteristics of the academic community; (d) the adjustment and integration into the academic community.

## 3. Findings and Discussion

### 3.1 *The meaning attached to being an academi*

Most of the respondents of the study have an average knowledge of the academic and working milieu in the university. Although they have been undergraduate students at the university levels and spent much time in that environment nevertheless when they were students they were focusing more on their studies and doing assignments for the respective lecturers. The majority were in fact focusing on the priority of teaching which they considered as important. Those who had obtained their masters degree were focusing on the transition time between doing PhD and their presence at the faculty. The ones that graduated with a PhD appeared to be more confident and settled after being immersed in the academic scholarly training doing PhD locally and abroad compared to those with the Masters degree. Responses procured from lecturers with Doctoral Degrees included the following:

“I was under the impression that I am supposed to do all teaching and researching”

“After obtaining my doctoral degree I guess I should continue researching using my research knowledge: the university is the place to execute this knowledge I have acquired”

“I guess I will be required to teach certain subjects related to my specialization”

“Glad to be recruited into the varsity academia being one of the successful applicants”

“I am aware there will be a lot of responsibilities and challenges. Of course teaching writing and involved in research”

“Well I guess it's basically to teach in my area”

“I have a fair picture of the future what is expected from me as an academic staff in the university”

Responses from the newcomers with the Masters Degree reflected the transient nature of their stay at the university:

“I guess initially I was assigned to teach”

“I think i am recruited to further my studies and contribute to capacity building’

“Preparing to apply placement in the universities abroad”

“Preparing my doctoral proposal and assist the faculty whenever required”

“I had a fair idea but was actually waiting for more insight into the near future”

### *3.2 The changing needs and demands of the academia*

The newcomers were asked to give their perceptions on whether they are facing needs and demands of the academia which are changing or have changed. Most of the responses indicated that regardless of qualifications they agreed that they were faced with many challenges that they did not thought of originally. The responses revealed some elements of surprise or shock. Nevertheless there was concern about their future career which has to be addressed. The responses below described the perceptions of novice academic staff with Doctoral Degrees towards their tasks and responsibilities at the universities.

“I suddenly realised that the expectations looked harder to achieve”

“I am beginning to perceive that there is more to plain teaching or researching ; there is also a great deal of adaptation to make socially, physically, emotionally”

“Suddenly I feel I have greater responsibility to produce articles in prestigious journals”

“Somehow I seemed to get the message that all around the academia is fighting to the wits end to produce”

“It is harder than I first thought” “Life cannot be as rosy and relaxing”

“My career seems to twist to bend in a more difficult path”

“Yes actually the jobs are more challenging”

“Of course my expectations about university life and responsibilities have changed. Since I return to active duty due to UKM being a research university; the responsibilities now reflect academicians as researchers to generate new knowledge not as teachers.”

“Compared to 2004 now I feel that it is harder work because one has to do lots of paper work to accommodate the needs of MQA, ISO and the rest. Not really a tall order if we are given time and guidance “

“After furthering my studies and obtaining my PhD I realize that my role in the university has diversified. “I am required to teach, do research and publish “I feel really excited accomplishing all these roles but at times I feel scared because I am new and don't really know how to go about and get things started”

Tutors with Masters Degrees responded in the following manner:

“I tally along with my seniors”

“I listened to the briefings given and i think there are more and greater expectations”

“No matter what we are required to contribute to university rankings”

“Suddenly I have to do a lot of helping administratively: My seniors expect me to help them in organizing Conferences”

### *3.2 Perceptions on the academic community*

In order to survive in the university environment newcomers have to familiarize and get used to the social and intellectual fabric of university life which include interactions among peers and seniors. The responses below describe whether their perceptions were positive or negative and whether there exists the sense of unfamiliarity or certainty with regards the academic community:

Responses from tutors with Masters’ Degrees include:

“I am not too sure whether the people inside here (meaning the faculty members) are open, friendly and collegial”

“I expect the academic community to be open and collaborative encouraging lots of interaction; however that was rather untrue”

“It looks like there is an invisible barrier in human relationships”

“I do not find the seniors as approachable as I deemed them to be”

“Sharing and collaborating? Wow I think it’s more hierarchical and individualistic”

“We newcomers are quite aware of the organizational structure from the lower rung to the highest echelon who is who? I am too afraid to approach the seniors until a kind professor talked to me first”

“I observed that the climate is fiercely competitive and thus individualistic”

“During faculty meetings expectations and demands are being voiced”

“It’s like the Faculty and the university is in full swing in the rat race beating time and time is limited”

“I am not too familiar with KPI’s described as key performance indicators”

“People are too busy too preoccupied too focused on their own work”

Responses from new lecturers with Doctoral Degrees include:

“I know I have my doctoral experiences to back me up but that is insufficient: I have to read and read and be sensitive to all announcements: I do not like to look too ignorant of what’s happening”

“Luckily there is good dissemination of ideas through the web and emails but on a more personal level I feel like a stranger left alone”

“The university does support us through seminars, discussion groups and induction courses. I find these seminars and discussion groups helpful”

“A remark worth mentioning is the fact the academia has to publish in ISI and Scopus journals and they have to tune in to such expectations. Yes indeed these expectations are very important; however these expectations are very challenging especially for newcomers like me who have no experienced writing”

“Everyone seems to be bogged down with the demand for quality and productivity in this research university”

“I feel like an alien from outer space because things look unfamiliar”

“Some regarded the university as being on a highly competitive ground; thus it is quite difficult to adjust”

“An adjustment problem would include working hard to publish in ISI and Scopus journals; returning from PhD the data is nearly not as viable moreover the data has been utilised and published earlier”

“Yes there seemed to be a close relationship between the new lecturers and the seniors especially in terms of non academic work such as hosting and preparing for a conference “However there are also cases where the two groups are far apart in academic work”

“I feel that collegiality seem lacking because the hierarchical nature of the setup; young lecturers are reluctant to approach the experienced senior ones.”

“The professors have their own agenda chairing important sponsored researches and have no time to talk to us”

“Announcements are posted in the website. I will follow the criteria and try to meet them. However the opportunity to interact successfully with the seniors to ensure research findings get to be published is quite far away”

“There exist hierarchical relationships with the seniors however this also means that seniors have to play the big brother role to the juniors”. If that is happening than it may not be a bad thing; However seniors should also have an open mind and listen to their juniors.

“They have some good ideas to share and anyway they are our mentors’

### 3.3 *Coping strategies employed by the newcomers*

The newcomers were asked about the coping strategies they employed to manage the academic environment. The responses indicated the newcomers’: (a) efforts to be involved and volunteering in faculty events; (b) being attentive to environmental stimulation and information; (c) being self-regulated; (d) seeking help from others .The responses indicated the similarity between the tutors with Masters Degrees and the lecturers with Doctoral Degrees.

Reponses from lecturers who possess Doctoral Degrees included:

“I have my own vision of what I want therefore I have no problem building my career and I do not wait for others to guide me: I guide myself and plan accordingly”

“I listened carefully during the faculty meetings. Normally I sat at the back row where there is space for younger lecturers like me”

“Looking back I have already obtained my PhD; I was trained to work hard solve problems thus it is not difficult for me to surmount this difficulty”

“I am equally ambitious and I will find ways by asking my peers and friendly seniors”

“I tried to volunteer myself whenever the faculty need help on a research project”

“I read through the university webpage and try to understand the philosophy

““I try to understand the university's aims and ambitions ““I read the Vice Chancellor's key note addresses”

“There are mentors around although it is not formally executed and instituted”

“I tried to plan my work so that I can manage myself successfully ““I remember Steven Covey? He stated if we fail to plan we will be more often than not trying to fill in datelines”

Responses from tutors with Masters Degrees included:

“I try to seek opinion here and there: I asked my seniors who are approachable and friendly”

“I observed successful professors and made efforts to see them: I am lucky they are open and give assistance”

“I feel grateful the university gives lots of encouragement to younger lecturers like me”

“I attended courses organized by the university related to teaching and research”

“The university is generous enough to give us research funds or seed money to encourage us to do research”

“I keep updating myself with the activities in the universities as well as get guidance and advice from seniors”

“I make sure I get support from others in the same boat as I am such as engaging peer support”

### *3.4 Needs expressed by the newcomers*

The needs of newcomers were gauged in order to help them developed further in their career and to further understand the difficulties they were in. Dominant among the needs expressed by both the tutors and lecturers are: (a) improvement of the mentor mentee system; (b) involvement in research projects with seniors; (c) conducting career profiles; (d) coaching and induction courses and; (e) more positive interactions between newcomers and seniors. The responses mentioned are depicted below:

“I hope the university formalize more systematically the mentor system where a young lecturer is paired with an older senior experienced professor”

“I hope to interact substantively with a professor who is an expert in my area whether at my faculty or outside the university”

“I would be very grateful if senior professors can enlist my help in their projects whether research or teaching”

“”Perhaps the faculty administrators can enlist the help of the Professors to coach us”

“There are those whom have worked with the senior professors' well: I must approach them on their style of interacting: I must learn from them how to carry and present myself”

“I will volunteer to help the professors teach and do research: In that way I also learn the technique of developing the research proposals”

“The university should pay more attention to career profiling programs of both short term and long term nature.

“I think in a research university newcomers should be given personal coaching by the seniors and professors. To guide them in their career; to help them start the research and to help them overcome challenges”

“Newcomers should be guided on how they are to be evaluated and graded”.

“The Faculty must ensure that positive interactions exist between seniors and juniors”

#### 4. Discussion

The findings revealed the type of experiences newcomers faced when they are recruited into the academia and the challenges they have to face. As there appears to be a gap and non-congruence between original expectation and reality newcomers may have felt some form of cognitive dissonance. Although the newcomers expected the university milieu to be more facilitating such expectation was not fully met. Job description and career development are thus important components that need to be dealt with thoroughly. Newcomers expected senior colleagues to provide a more effective mentoring process (Boice, 1992). However the findings show that the responses of several senior professors were more like warm than collegial and thus the newcomers are left much on their own to envisage how to manage their career profile. Most newcomers expressed surprise at the changing university expectations and feel threatened if they cannot live up to such standards. This is fully understandable as they have limited knowledge and experiences compared to the more senior professors or lecturers.

The highly individualistic and competitive nature of the academia is indeed an undeniable fact. In the university competition is dominant (Darwin, 2000). Lecturers tend to protect their turf and they are fiercely guarded when it comes to promotion and specialization. The win-win situation is rather a far cry in competitive situation. Thus the win lose situation is more real in the university settings. Because of such climate, newcomers find it rather difficult to adjust in the competitive atmosphere due to lack of knowledge maturity and experience (Boyd, 2010). Although younger lecturers hoped for support from seniors as a cultural ethos this is more the exception than the practice. As a result, newcomers are left much on their own at times. Courses on developing self-regulation and Meta cognition should be developed to help newcomers excel in the academic world.

The findings described the rather shallow and superficial relationship between the newcomers and their seniors. There is apparently no solid interface between the two factions (Gravett 2004). This would imply the need for teambuilding and coordination. This would also imply the lack of focus on the humanistic structures in the university when attention seemed to be more focused on academic achievement measured by the quantity and quality of publications. The lack of involvement of professors in the lives of newcomers may be attributed to the lack of consensus in the university on the role of professors as real mentors not just merely paying lip service (Bennett, 1998; Boice, 2000) suggested the concepts of hospitality and thoughtfulness in daily interaction between individuals in organizations. The mentoring system whereby juniors or newcomers are coached by senior professors have to be re-evaluated and redesigned to ensure that there is a systematic institutionalized structure in the university environment to promote collegiality collaboration and team building between old and new lecturers.

In order to deal more fairly on this issue it is best that we look into the perspectives of experienced or senior professors who can be the best model to emulate and whose experiences can give insight into the career development of newcomers. The needs reflected from the findings of this study can be integrated into the current career development of newcomers.

#### References

- Alvesson, M and Skoldberg, K. (2002). *Reflexive Methodology. New Vistas for Qualitative Research*. London: Sage
- Bennet, J.B. (1998). *Collegial Professionalism. The Academy, Individualism and the Common Good* (Phoenix, AZ: American Council on Education and The Oryx Press.
- Boice, R. (1992). *The New Faculty Member. Supporting and Fostering Professional Development*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass
- Boice, R. (2000). *Advice for New Faculty Members*. Nihil Nimus. Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon
- Boyd, P. (2010). Academic induction for professional educators: supporting the workplace learning of newly appointed lectures in teacher and nurse education. *International Journal for Academic Development*. Vol. 15: 155-165
- Darwin, A. (2000). *Critical Reflections on Mentoring in Work Settings. Adults Education Quarterly*, 50(3), 197-211
- Dunkin, M.J. (1990). The induction of academic staff to a university: processes and product. *Higher Education* 20: 47-66. Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Gravett, S. (2004). *Transformative Learning in Faculty Development. A Case Study from South Africa*. In J.Vella and Associates Dialogue Education at Work. A Case Book. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass pp 85-100.

- Gravett, S. & Petersen, N. (2007). 'You just try to find your way': The experience of newcomers to academia. *International Journal of Life Education*, 26(2): 193 – 207.
- Light, G. & Cox, R. (2001). *Learning and Teaching in Higher Education. The Reflective Professional*. London: Palgrave.